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THE BODY CATALOGUED: PUBLIC ANATOMY MUSEUMS IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY NEW YORK

Rachel Multz

Mentors: Margaret Garb and Corinna Treitel

Anatomy museums were a form of popular entertainment during the nineteenth century. There were private museums run by medical schools or hospitals, and public museums that were run by individuals who sought to profit from those curious about the human body. This thesis analyzes the catalogues (logbooks of specimens they had on display) of three public anatomy museums that were opened in different decades of the nineteenth century in New York City. These museums largely restricted entry to men only. The catalogues reveal the various ways that these proprietors wanted nineteenth-century New Yorkers to view human bodies, and to reinforce biological hierarchies based on race, class, and ethnicity. The catalogues tended to emphasize sexual morality of women and particularly of men. Within the museums, the 'Pathological Rooms' showed grotesque specimens of diseased genitalia to frighten men into observing nineteenth century sexual morals. The museums also reinforced the negative stereotypes that existed about African Americans, Native Americans, and indigenous peoples, typically justifying inequalities and injustice with biological explanations. In addition, they showcased specimens of 'monstrosities' such as fetal abnormalities or adult deformities. This type of showmanship is what anatomy museums are known for, and it is one of the many characteristics of these museums that led them to fall out of favor with the public and the medical community. This thesis seeks to shed light on this forgotten yet important aspect of the history of anatomy and the history of New York City.